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Reagan seeks military aid for 'contras

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan, saying the Nicaraguan rebels can't fight the Sandinista government with "Band-Aids and mosquito nets," launched a campaign yesterday for congressional approval of a \$100 million "contra" aid package that includes about \$70 million in covert military assistance.

The president, meeting at the White House with Republican congressional leaders, urged Congress to lift aid restrictions that he said "tie our hands," meaning prohibitions on lethal aid and its distribution by the CIA.

Mr. Reagan said the current program of providing \$27 million in so-called humanitarian assistance has helped the contras, but not enough.

"We have to do more to help them," he said. "You can't fight attack helicopters piloted by Cubans with Band-Aids and mosquito nets."

The president declined to give the details of the aid package during the first part of the meeting, to which reporters were admitted, but Sen. Richard G. Lugar, R-Ind., said later that the \$100 million request included \$70 million in covert military assistance and \$30 million in humanitarian aid.

Mr. Lugar, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman, said he thought Mr. Reagan's request, which is expected to go to Capitol Hill in a few weeks, would have "a pretty good shot" in the Republican-controlled Senate. But House GOP leader Robert H. Michel, R-Ill., predicted a rougher road in his chamber, which is dominated by Democrats.

On Capitol Hill, the proposal was greeted with skepticism from long-standing foes of contra aid as well as some members who had helped win approval for the current \$27 million.

Maryland Representative Michael D. Barnes, D-8th, chairman of the House Western Hemisphere affairs subcommittee, called the military aid request "a direct slap in the face" to the eight Latin American nations that have called on the United States to hold off such assistance and open direct negotiations with the Sandinistas instead.

Representative Dave McCurdy, D-Okla., a member of the House Select Committee on Intelligence who had helped build support in the House for the humanitarian aid money, said that last year's coalition now appeared to be shattered.

"It will fail," he said of the military aid request. He added that many House members who were "swing votes" last year now say they're "leaning against" supporting even humanitarian aid because of the administration's alleged failure to follow through on promises to seek a negotiated settlement.

But another intelligence panel member, Representative Robert L. Livingston, R-La., said military aid was the only responsible option. Humanitarian aid was a "total failure," he said, with less than 50 percent of the funds approved even reaching the rebels because of distribution difficulties and other problems.

Manuel Cordero, minister-counselor of the Nicaraguan Embassy in Washington, also pointed to the advice of the Latin American nations, then said, "It looks like the administration has rejected the path of talks and negotiation and chosen a path that is leading to military confrontation in the region."

Mr. Cordero, in a telephone interview, said the helicopters cited by the president were piloted by members of the Nicaraguan air force, not Cubans. The administration, he said, "is raising the so-called Cuban specter to scare Congress."

Mr. Reagan told the lawmakers that the contra resistance has continued to grow and is "operating deep inside Nicaragua," but Senator Lugar described the situation differently, calling it "pretty ambiguous."

"But clearly without the support that this new legislation would give the contras, they would have trouble bringing the Sandinistas to the negotiating table," Mr. Lugar said. "That's part of all this to try to get negotiations, reconciliation, a new government."

The decision facing the United States, he said, was "whether we're going to have a Soviet base on this continent or not, and essentially we're going to have one if the contras are not successful in re-ordering the government of Nicaragua."

White House spokesman Larry M. Speakes, at a briefing, declined to support the senator's contention that the United States was looking to install "a new government" in Nicaragua.

Mr. Speakes did say that in recent months there has been "a massive influx of sophisticated Soviet and Cuban weaponry and a continuation of Cuban personnel directly involved with the Sandinista government."

He further charged that the Sandinistas, in an effort to influence Congress and the American people, had opened a "very sophisticated" disinformation campaign and may have paid an American public relations firm to coordinate it.

Mr. Cordero, of the Nicaraguan Embassy, termed the allegation about a disinformation campaign "preposterous."